Phases of Constructive Religious Thought

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGION. A Sociological View. By Charles A. Elwood.
CREATIVE CHRISTIANITY. By George Cross.
THE BOOK OF JOB. By Moses Buttenwieser.
LANDMARKS IN THE HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY. By Kirsopp Lake.
A STUDENT'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION. By William Kelly Wright.
A FAITH THAT ENQUIRES. By Sir Henry Jones.
THE CREATIVE CHRIST. By Edward S. Drown.
THE PSYCHIC HEALTH OF JESUS. By Walter E. Bundy.
APOLOGY AND POLEMIC IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. By the Rev. Andrew D. Heffern.
THE SIMPLE GOSPEL. By H. S. Brewster.
PROPERTY: ITS RIGHTS AND DUTIES. By L. T. Hobhouse, Hastings Rashdall, A. D. Lindsay, A. J. Carlyle, Vernon Bartlett, H. G. Wood, H. Scott Holland and W. M. Geldart.

IT can scarcely be thought a chance happening that the past year has brought out a much larger number of books on religion than usual. The spring list of one publishing house (the Macmillan Company), which is by no means a specialist in such literature, contains more than a score of titles, a selection from which is listed here. A glance at these titles alone may suggest the one thing they have in common—that is, a spirit of inquiry that aims to be constructive. It can hardly be doubted that this large output of religious speculation is a natural response to a deep and widespread interest in matters spiritual. It indicates an acceleration in the worldwide movement, which began a score of years or so ago, toward a new synthesis, or some revaluation of religion throughout the nominally Christian world. There was a lull in the controversy after the first battles between modern science and the ancient orthodoxies which reached its height nearly half a century ago. There were signs of a renewed activity a few years before the war, especially in the revolt from a too mechanistic conception of life—a revolt most strikingly manifest in Bergsonism, and in some of the speculations of William James, and to some extent, in popular form in certain of the novelists, led by H. G. Wells.

Naturally the shock of the war has intensified this growth of concern in religion, although not in any such spectacular form as some folk expected. Perhaps more potent than even the war was—and is—the progress toward collectivism in thought, using that word in the broadest sense with no reference to any narrow limitation of it. The great central change in the mental attitude of thinking men may perhaps be stated tentatively as a turning from the mediæval query, "What shall I do to be saved?" to the broader question, omitting the emphasis on the personal pronoun, What shall humanity as a whole or, more specifically, the nation, or even the church, do, not merely to "save" itself but to go forward to a better life as a whole?

This change of attitude may amount to nothing less than a revolution in due time, for no matter how much of Christian ethics it may be able to preserve it is inevitably destructive of the whole fabric of the mediæval church which is based upon authority and must rely for that initial authority upon its revelation, whereas the modern mind turns more and more toward rationalism and seeks its starting point not in any revelation but in a purely human science.

II.

There are two obvious side currents away from the main stream of thought. One is purely reactionary, embodied in its crudest form in such teachings as Mr. Bryan's, and in a more intellectualized but no less vigorous form in the "revivalist" preaching of a certain popular Baptist clergyman, in whose church the announcement was recently made at the beginning of a "revival" that the preacher meant to "give 'em hell from start to finish." Mr. Bryan is naively of the sixth century, the Baptist brother of the eighteenth: to the modernist they are equally out of date. The second important side stream is toward mysticism, in one form or another; Christian Science, "New Thought," Spiritualism and a score of minor cults. But the main stream is along the newer lines suggested by the dozen titles at the head of this survey.

Nearly all of this effort is aimed toward a sort of new reformation; toward a restatement of the essentials of Christianity that shall be in consonance with modern science, modern democracy and sociology. At its extreme it produces such a movement as that of the "Community Church," which pretty effectually throws overboard all of the baggage of two thousand years of theology, and tries for a fresh start. Most of the reconstructors do not go quite so far as that. Indeed, the differences between them consist chiefly in their variances as to what can be preserved and carried along into the new synthesis that they all desire. "Religion," says Dr. Lake, "lives through the death of religions." In one way of looking at it, the problem thus becomes, What is mere deadwood, to be inexorably cut out?

The simplest form of answer is that typified by the Rev. Mr. Brewster's book, "The Simple Gospel." His aim is to bring back the church, and with it the world, to the simplicity and directness of the doctrine of the Sermon on the Mount. He believes that a real acceptance of this is adequate and also workable as the only basis for social reconstruction, and he further argues that the failure to attain that result is due to the failure of professed Christians to take that doctrine seriously and carry it out in action to its logical extreme.

That message contains all that the most eager social reformer could desire; and the latent loyalty to Jesus is the most potent driving force which any social movement can procure. No other force is powerful enough for the work in hand.

He also sees that the modern church is in danger, and he repeats the ancient call—"Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," and warns that unless the church "repents" there is no salvation for the world. It is noteworthy how insistently the millenarian note sounds in nearly all attempts to rally the believers to any revival. Sometimes it is possibly no more than a by-product, almost the unconscious expression of an age-old habit, but often it is an active force. Mr. Brewster does not stress it, but it is there.

But to most cogitators the answer does not seem quite so simple as that. Prof. Ellwood of the University of Missouri, for example, sees the need of a church organized upon the social sciences as a basis, and he conceives such a church as broad enough to include not merely Roman Catholic and Protestant, but also the Greek Church and the Jew. Its aims, he argues, must be the "social redemption of mankind—the creation of a Christian world." He elaborates:

> This means something more than a ministry to individuals as individuals. It means the transformation of customs and institutions. It means the shaping of policies and conduct of groups as well as of individuals . . . . The subject of redemption is not the individual but the world of individuals. . . . The church must undertake the work of creating conscience, a public conscience, upon the behavior of groups as well as of individuals.

III.

Dr. Kirsopp Lake states the modern position more broadly in his remarkable little book—a small volume, in a way a byproduct from the preparation of his large forthcoming work on "The Beginnings of Christianity," but compact of most suggestive thought and full of illuminating observation. Rarely does one find so much in such small compass. He summarizes the feeling of the younger thinkers, as he sees it:

> They feel that the world in which we live is the expression of some great plan or purpose or pattern which is not yet complete, which shows no sign of finality, but is ever growing in complexity; which resolves itself again and again into simplicity, and then spreads out again on a yet wider scale. The plan or purpose is not a dead mechanical thing; the life which explains it is within it and not without it. Men are partly the result but partly also the instruments or even agents of that purpose. Wisdom is the right understanding of its nature; and righteousness is the attempt to subordinate human purposes to this great purpose of life. For man is not only an effect, he is a cause. . . .

That is not the same thing as the Logos Christology or doctrine of salvation as propounded by Origen, but I think he would have understood it had he lived now. It is not the same thing as the teaching of the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus, yet I do not think that he would have condemned it, for great men understand the thoughts of lesser ones though they themselves fail to be understood. The thoughts and words of Jesus, like those of Origen, were borrowed from his own time and race; they belong to the first century as those of Origen belong to the third. . . . But the will of Jesus and the will of Origen, if we can reach them through the language and thought of their time, have no such (historical) limitations. . . . Both were animated by a desire to accomplish the purpose of God, the God who is life. And that purpose did not appeal to them as the achievement for themselves of any salvation, in this world, or in the world to come, beyond the reach of other men, but rather to show them what is the way of life, the natural way, consistent with the purpose of God and the pattern of life.

It would be difficult to find a more comprehensive summary of the central thought to which these attempts at a reconstruction of Christianity converge than that passage. Many, even of the most liberal thinkers, will desire to add something to it—as, for instance, Prof. Cross, whose book centers upon Christ as the "perfect personality"—but few will seek to take anything away from Dr. Lake's statement. And it comes curiously close to such definitely non-Christian statements as that of John Burroughs in his attempt to sketch the beginning of a religion of evolution.

IV.

From a very different angle there is also a striking parallelism between Burroughs and the version of Job given by Professor Buttenwieser—paradoxical as it may at first seem. That is why the book is included in this survey, although it is primarily a work of textual criticism and might be thought naturally far from any consideration of the most modern tendencies of thought. It is indeed a far cry from the passionate, protesting Job to the cold, passionless modern philosopher, but, as Prof. Buttenwieser shows him to us, it is a Job who, after all, is "accepting the universe," to much the same result as Burroughs did, though the conclusions are stated in widely variant terms. The agreement is impressive—between the hot blooded Hebrew poet and the dispassionate twentieth century scientist.

Prof. Buttenwieser's recension and rearrangement of the text is radical, and will hardly be accepted by Hebrew scholars without controversy. This is not the place for any detailed examination of it, but it may be said that he makes out a very strong case, that his work is based upon the broadest scholarship and minute research, and, more importantly for our purpose, that his results show us a Job more impressive than ever, a figure even more colossal than in the usually accepted version. Prof.

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New Fiction

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year VII," and the recrudescence of the tragic uprising of the Chouans, the Royalist movement that was driven into a new life in that year by the persecutions. It is a fine hunting ground for the writer of stories of intrigue, hairbreadth escapes, feuds, hidden treasure and all the rest of it. Mr. Broster makes good use of all these, and his historical background is fairly good—not too much in evidence, but sufficiently there. When the plot opens the adventurers have just gained a long lost clew to the whereabouts of a great treasure buried at the chateau of Mirabel more than a century before—a hoard of gold, rubies and precious vessels to make one's mouth water. Like all insurgents they need the money. But the chase for it involves a great deal more than mere treasure hunting. It takes over four hundred pages to reach a convenient stopping place, but there are no dull spots en route. The story may be recommended to the leisurely reader who is fond of high romance.

A SON OF THE SAHARA. By Louise Gerard. The Macaulay Company.

IT WAS, of course, inevitable that the great popular success of what movie experts call "desert stuff" should call forth many imitators, especially of one very vicious book that is still a "best seller." This is a rather poor example; crude in detail, utterly unreal in its "passion" and "mystery," and, for the most part, simply dull. It is another case of the kidnaped white girl, carted off by the imitation desert chieftain, a "sultan" in this case, and subjected to a series of more or less intentionally shocking end that the "Arab" turns out to be as white as the lady and they are duly scheduled to live happily thereafter in entirely proper relations. This one is something of a case of "intimations of immorality" and near-cave-man, rather than anything more realistic, though the lady does get herself put up for sale as a slave, and she does manage to get under the lash of the eunuch's whip in a harem scene. It is sheer claptrap, and about as wholesome a diet for the young reader of unformed mind as a dose of moral arsenic.

HOMELAND. By Margaret Hill McCarter. Harper & Bros.

HERE we have another pair of disgruntled war veterans, returned soldier and nurse, who find the "homeland" not quite all it should be. It is a very well meant, wholesome book—wholesome enough for the readers at whom it is aimed, and it has some good dramatic spots (as in the chapter dealing with the verdict in the case of the damage suit arising from an automobile truck accident), but it is a too loquacious performance to be ranked seriously as a novel. The people in it all do a great deal of orating to each other, using the good old phrases once dear to us from Fourth of July orations and the spread eagle oratory of the last century.

"It is time for men to work to new purpose and be truer, and for women to weep less and have more sense than under the old order; time for opportunities to be equalized if we are to have a living America. I want to first understand and then to help make a bigger, better America," &c.

Excellent, sound doctrine, but it gets badly in the way of the story. To make its point solidy in the form of fiction it is necessary for such moral nourishment to mix itself into the narrative a little more smoothly. If it isn't to be lumpy such dough calls for more kneading.